WILLIAM M. HOWARD, BLIND
PIANO - TUNER.

Edward P. Rockey

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WILLIAM M. HOWARD

Talented Blind Tuner of the Schiller Piano Co., Oregon, Illinois, and His Remarkable Career

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Interesting People of the Piano Industry

By HOWARD P. ROCKEY

William M. Howard—The Talented Blind Tuner of the Schiller Piano Co., Oregon, Ill., and His Remarkable Career

MOST of us who are in full possession of all our faculties are unappreciative. We're inclined to kick about handicaps which, in reality, do not exist—and, because we haven't any real, so-called "overwhelming handicaps," leave it to us to find them.

But what about the man who starts life handicapped by blindness? It would seem as though he had a right to kick, wouldn't it? Yet we know a man who has passed his sixty-second birthday, who has been blind since infancy and who has turned that handicap into an asset which has made him one of the best piano tuners in the world!

The name of this man is William M. Howard and he is a member of the factory organization of the Schiller Piano Company in Oregon, Ill., home of the famous Schiller Super-Grand with the Bauer Patented Construction and other fine Schiller pianos. However, if you asked a native of Oregon to direct you to the home of William M. Howard, the probabilities are you'd be stared at dubiously. But if you said "Bill Howard's home" you'd be directed in a jiffy, for everybody in Oregon knows Bill Howard.

Speaking of Accomplishments, What About These?

Bill Howard has charge of the tuning department of the Schiller Piano Company and he personally does the fine tuning on every Schiller grand. There was a time when Mr. Howard did all the tuning in the Schiller factory, but that was in the early days, when the production of Schiller pianos had not reached its present proportions. Now Bill Howard has all he can do to take care of the grand tunings alone and exercise a general supervision over the entire tuning department.

Here is a man who has never seen a piano, yet is a master pianist himself, has passed judgment on the tone quality of more than 70,000 Schiller pianos in the last thirty-five years, has personally given nearly 150,000 tunings to Schiller-made instruments in addition to hundreds of "outside" or "independent free-lance" tunings of other makes, is the "father" of two of the scales now used in Schiller pianos, is an aeknowledged authority on the compositions of Beethoven, Chopin, Grieg and Schubert, and plays the pipe organ, violin, clarinet and oboe with equal skill and facility.

Add to all these accomplishments the fact that Bill Howard is a mechanical genius and an "avid reader" of good books, is the father of five girls who are all married now and in possession of perfect sight (all of them having had at least a high school education and two of them being college graduates) and is the husband of a blind woman who is also a talented musician, and then try and convince yourself that people with all five senses normal know anything about handicaps.

His Career Was Not Devoid of the Romantic, Either

Bill Howard was born on a farm near Creston in Ogle County, not far from Oregon, in 1865, and was one of six children. Between the ages of three and four months he became troubled with sore eyes. Neglect and improper treatment made this condition worse and suddenly total blindness set in.

The hero of this month's story really started his career with his entry into the Illinois Institute for the Blind at Jacksonville. It was there that he received a complete grammar and high school education, which he topped off with a most thorough musical course. He studied harmony and counterpoint, the tuning and repairing of musical instruments and learned to play the piano, pipe organ, clarinet, violin and oboe, as well as mastering a course in organ building.

While at this institute Mr. Howard fell head over heels in love with a beautiful girl who was also blind and a student there. Of course, Mr. Howard was unable to perceive her facial beauty, but her voice was also beautiful and it thrilled him through and through. In this respect Bill Howard is like most of the blind—he possesses abnormal senses of hearing and touch. He has the sharpest ear of any man the writer of these lines has ever known.

After leaving the Illinois Institute for the Blind, Mr. Howard married this girl. The couple went to Oregon to live and there Bill Howard opened up a piano and organ store. More than a few Kimball organs, by the way, were sold by him at that time, and he also put in part of his time selling Kimball organs in Rockford. In 1891 the old Schaeffer Piano Manufacturing Company opened a factory in Oregon and its officials tried to induce Mr. Howard to go with them and take charge of the tuning department. Finally they made him such an attractive offer, with the privilege of devoting so much of his time to independent or free-lance tuning and repairing, that he accepted and for eight months he worked for I. N. Rice.

Here Is One Blind Tuner Who Knows How to Chip a Back

It was during this period that Bill Howard came into contact with all makes of pianos. In fact, from 1891 until the present time, Mr. Howard has tuned at least one piano of every make that was on the market prior to 1920, and he will tell you, with intense pride, that in his opinion none can compare with the Schiller for "general, all-around qualities." Bill is too modest to mention the "staying-in-tune" qualities of Schiller pianos, which can be directly attributed to him; but, at that, he doesn't have to, because everybody knows of this factor, anyway.

Piano Mag Service

William M. Howard, blind tuner of the Schiller Piano Company, sitting alongside one of the famous Schiller Super-Grands with Bauer Patented Construction, which he has just tuned

One big point in Mr. Howard's ability as a tuner is the fact that he knows the entire process of tone building and piano construction. In other words, his knowledge of the business goes beyond the limited possibilities of mere tuning. He is a "voicer" and a regulator, and there is not a single phase of piano construction with which he is unfamiliar.

Edgar B. Jones, president of the Schiller Piano Co., says nobody can equal Bill Howard when it comes to boring a pin block and fitting the pin. And it is common trade knowledge

that, while there are quite a number of blind piano tuners in America, who has ever heard of one who could properly chip a back? The real foundation of all piano tuning, as piano men know, starts with the chipping. The tuner begins his work where the chipper has left off, while the strings are loose, then establishes the pitch and sets the temperament—in fact, lays the foundation for the life of that piano. And Bill Howard has no superior when it comes to chipping a back.

Howard Joins Schiller—He's Been There for 35 Years

In 1892 the Schaeffer factory was shaking, about ready to topple, when Frederick G. Jones, founder of the Schiller Piano Company and father of the present president, Edgar B. Jones, stepped in, took it over, reorganized and rebuilt it along entirely different lines, and thus laid the foundation for the Schiller Piano Company. Mr. Jones had always been on friendly terms with Mr. Howard, and now he offered the blind tuner a place in his new piano company.

That offer was accepted and Mr. Howard has been with the Schiller organization ever since—a record of thirty-five consecutive years of unbroken service with this one house. During a recent visit to Oregon, Edgar B. Jones informed the writer that not one piano goes out of the Schiller factory until William M. Howard has "O. K.'d" its tune. He also stated that the blind tuner was one of the most valuable men in his employ.

Though Mr. Howard is a very approachable man, he is not exactly eager to talk about himself. He does not regard blindness as a handicap and, therefore, does not feel that he has accomplished anything extraordinary. So what follows is the result of a story about him, told to the writer by Mr. Jones.

"His Nose Knows"—That's How a Fire Was Nipped in the Bud

One day some years ago Bill Howard was working on a piano on the main floor of the big Schiller plant, near the grand display room, when his super-sensitive nostrils detected that pungent, unmistakable odor of burning wood. He mentioned it to several of the men in that part of the plant. They sniffed here and there, but all their normal sense of smell could detect was the usual odor given forth by sawdust, varnish and oil.

One of the men even remarked, "Oh, you're just imagining things, Bill—better change that brand of tobacco you chew."

But Mr. Howard's nostrils had never deceived him and he didn't think they would now. So finally he moved toward the direction from which he believed that odor emanated. Suddenly he stopped, moved about a certain spot on the floor and began tapping the flooring there with his foot.

"Something's burning right in there," he declared emphatically.

Edgar B. Jones happened to come along just then and he and two of his men, to satisfy the tuner, tore off some of the floor planks. No sooner had this been done when all smelled smoke, and finally saw a thin veil of it creeping upward. Down further they dug into the sawdust and finally uncovered some smouldering embers.

Bill Howard was right!

How the fire started is a mystery which has never been solved, but Mr. Howard's keen sense of smell detected it and probably saved the plant from a disastrous blaze, for otherwise several hundred thousand dollars' worth of finished pianos, expensive hardwoods, yards full of lumber, a storehouse full of wire and imported ivories, would have been threatened with destruction.

What a Wonderful Piano Salesman He Would Have Made

Just before we left Oregon, the head of the Schiller organization remarked to us, sort of confidentially, "Assuming that just guts were required to sell pianos, wouldn't that man Howard have made a wonderful piano salesman?"

We agreed—but, better still, we felt keenly ashamed, for here we are, in full possession of all our faculties, yelping about the high cost of living, squawking about the "bad breaks" we get, kicking over the salary we make and so forth and so on.

Maybe you won't feel that way about it, but as for us—well, Bill Howard, the blind tuner of the Schiller Piano Company, taught us a lesson.

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